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A GROUP OF LONDONERS

E. V. LUCAS

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FROM

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A Group of Londoners

A GROUP OF LONDONERS

BY
E. V. LUCAS



PRIVATELY PRINTED FOR
EDMUND D. BROOKS AND HIS FRIENDS
MINNEAPOLIS

1913

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A GROUP OF LONDONERS

UPON the attitude of one book-hunter to another, in the same shop, as they rove about the shelves, much might be written. They draw nearer and then recede again; each trains the tail of his eye on the books which the other handles, hoping for a guide as to what his particular game may be; and each on finding something that he wants hastens to place it in safety (as near as possible to the spot where he found it, lest during his absence to a more distant *cache* the horrid competitor captures the district which he is in the midst of exploring). Thus we do suspect and hate each other, carrying on our struggle not with the openness and frank selfish barbarism of ladies during the Sales, but with all the skilful furtive concealments of civilisation.

These then being the prevailing manners of the book-hunter, judge how pleasant it must be when the other — the man with the obviously trained eye and discerning hand, who seems to be picking

up so much that is good (confound him!) — suddenly turns out to be an American collector with whom one has had agreeable correspondence across the Atlantic but whom one has never seen. It was thus that (in New Oxford Street) I met Mr. Brooks; and how natural that we should soon be talking about the secondhand book-shops of London and their frequenters! And so this little company of Londoners was brought together, at the desire of one who, though Minneapolis may be his wilderness, knows where the Promised Land really is as well as any body and gets there as often as he is able. May we soon meet in New Oxford Street again!

And when I say Londoners I do not mean that birth in London or even long residence in London must be understood; for Londoners may be anywhere (as the case of Mr. Brooks indicates), and some even may never have seen London all their lives. But this of course is carrying the thing too far: I don't want to be so clever as to develop that paradox; nor so modern. The fact however that Americans can quickly be such good Londoners, and men born in London such bad ones, proves that birth and association are nothing compared with impressionableness and plasticity. It is the material that makes the Londoner: a

tendency to centrality; a feeling that every thing that is not London is not London. "All time," said the atheist Julius Vanini, who in spite of his recantation was burned at the stake, "is lost that is not spent in love." The Londoner feels that too — with the substitution (a distinction with very little difference) of London for love; and he may feel it at any spot in the world to which iron circumstance or a treacherous caprice of his own has carried him. That is what I mean by Londoner, and the exiles are often, like Stanley Ortheris, more eloquent in praise of the city of their desire than ever they will be when in her midst again. Absence can but make their hearts grow fonder, as not always it does in other and grosser love, in spite of the proverbialist. Unlike Antaeus, their devotion can grow in strength by not kissing their mother.

The Londoners, however, whom I sketch in the pages that follow, are all — save that dear P. M. who is no more — in London at this moment and rarely absent from her; and if a certain family similarity is perceptible in them all, in that each has something of the collector spirit, it is because I am myself that way disposed, and like attracts like. But it is of the essence of the true Londoner, whether he consciously amasses or not, to be

noticing; and the collector who does not notice will have barren cabinets.

Looking at S. F. so fresh and ruddy, almost bucolic of visage, with a little pucker of perplexity ever in his brow, you would say, This man must have wandered into the city by chance; for how can he be a Londoner? He is perhaps an enthusiastic gardener with a nice hand for the seccateur (you would say), or, Not surprising if he breeds spaniels. But really you would be wrong, for S. F. has but one passion and that is old water-colour drawings, and only in London can such a passion be gratified. Not that it can ever be gratified at all, of course, for the passion of the collector learned its only cry from the daughters of the horse leech; yet each fresh morsel confers its own delight, even though it increases the void. What S. F. ought to be doing I have never ascertained: where the desk that should claim most of his wakeful hours; where the clerks and typists whose efforts bring him his gain; but no one knows better than I in what agreeable way he neglects his duty and misapplies his time, for I have helped him in the sweet pursuit.

Not a picture dealer great or small, not a sale room, is unacquainted with his mien. He is inde-

fatigable. He will turn over twenty portfolios of engravings and prints in the hope of one drawing. He will explore extra-illustrated books to the last dreary topographical page in the hope of one water-colour of merit. He buys *Keepsakes* and *Gems* and *Landscape Annuals* wherever he sees them, always trusting some day to come upon the originals of the steel plates. He is utterly ignorant of the R. A.s and A. R. A.s of the moment, but it would puzzle you to put a question about David Cox or the Varleys (John or Cornelius), Paul Sandby or Samuel Prout, that he could not answer. These are, however, the greater names. Ask him also of the lesser known: Hugh O'Neil or John Collett, William Payne (who discovered Payne's Grey) or John Glover (who tamed birds while he sketched), and he will tell you of them, and, what is more, show you examples of their work and explain why it is not any better than it ought to be. He is true to water as a Rechabite. Oil touches him not. You may lead him in vain through the National Gallery: he will be breaking for the basement all the time to glance once again at the Turner sketches; while it is at South Kensington that he is most truly at home, studying Francia (from whom the glorious Bonington had his early lessons), won-

dering why William Callow was never properly recognised, and deploring the fading of the Peter de Wints.

Strange how different men can be! H. E. is also a collector of pictorial art, but for him colour has no attraction whatever. Pen and pencil drawings, etchings and engravings, are his joy: but always and only of landscape — this green England of ours, in its austere moods for the most part, and in the fewest possible lines; although — for we are all, thank God, inconsistent — his eyes can wonderfully soften and indeed almost dim before Tom Girtin's "White House at Chelsea," that perfect first discovery, before Whistler or even Turner, of the beauty and magic of the London Thames. But there are wider differences than this between S. F. and H. E., not the least being that S. F. is a man of leisure and would be a man of leisure no matter how much he had to do or how little to live upon; whereas H. E., who is by no means needy, has never had any leisure in his life, and never will have. He is one who carries his work with him: his head is full of it, and he is always in a rush. Even had Heaven showered upon him riches I doubt if he would have contrived to evade as many honorary obligations as those which now overpower him of

necessity. None the less, in his rapid synthetic way he manages to know as much of the life of London of the present day as most of us, even to its comic singers, while of the London of the past he knows almost more than any.

For London is his theme. He was born and bred far from her roar, and he lives now on her outer fringe, where the Mother of Cities is visible—by day a pillar of smoke and by night a vast glow—yet not audible, and it is of course the sound of her that is sweetest to the initiated; yet she is his one thought. His shelves, even floors, groan beneath the weight of London literature, London journalism, London portfolios. His walls are covered with London prints, among which those other notes of landscape in firm and vivid line shine like flowers. Perhaps, to have such a passion, such white heat of admiration, it is necessary to be a provincial and come to the alluring Mecca with all one's adolescent homage and young enthusiasms fresh and thrilling. So did he, at any rate, some thirty years ago, and fell a slave and is a slave still—with the added power of recommending the bonds to others. Get H. E. to take you by the hand in any of London's older streets. "Here," he will say, "lived Sydney Smith." "There was the lodg-

ing of Johnson's Boswell in 1781." "That was the last church Christopher Wren built." "Lamb and his sister once had lodgings on that second floor." "Hazlitt died here in 1829." "Gainsborough's studio was where that building now stands." And so on. If I were autocrat, H. E. should be made curator of a London historical museum and it would be so interesting that the word museum would lose its present connotation and suggest pleasure.

K. M. is also a London collector, but he may be called a collector of life. He is not much less interested in water colours than S. F. but he adds oils to them; nor less fascinated by the ancient city than H. E.; nor by old books than C. C. R.; nor in out of the way reading than P. R.; but to all these things he adds an actuality that they lack. With sympathies for everything old he is yet intensely of the present. K. M. has been called the busiest man in London, but he also manages to see more of it than most idle Londoners. He is *par excellence* the Londoner with eyes. As he walks he notes, and the consequence is that he is a fund of inspiration to those who do not observe and want to be told things. He knows the obvious things and the recondite things, with all a Londoner's strange *lacunae*. Someone

once said to him, "There is only one thing more remarkable than the things you do know and that is the things you don't know;" but none the less he is rarely stumped utterly. He treasures not only the sights of London but its phrases. He can tell you not only what is the latest slang but when it came in, and often who brought it. He rejoices in a good idiom and only last week stopped me to enjoy with him a description he had overheard of a little London servant girl who one tristful Wednesday night was said to be "looking both ways for Sunday" — surely a very happy hitting off of the mid-week feeling. On another occasion, as we stood together sipping refreshment, I asked him why a "John Collins" was so called: a question I had put in vain to my many friends, and in an instant he told me of the old London waiter and quoted the lines —

"My name is John Collins, head waiter at Limmer's,
Corner of Conduit Street, Hanover Square;
My chief occupation is filling of brimmers
To solace young gentlemen laden with care."

Not many Americans, to whom a "John Collins" is more of a reality than with us, know that. But if any American in London wants his national beverages, K. M. is the man that he should ask;

for he knows the bars of London hardly less intimately than her libraries, and while he can tell you not only where you may see a Claude Monet and what time to reach Covent Garden to enjoy the most exquisite moment of the Russian ballet, he can tell you also where the best dry Martini is mixed.

K. M., however, although he will answer questions and interject comments, does not talk. My London talker is A. E. B. A. E. B. carries on the Johnson tradition: he sits in taverns and discourses on everything that crops up. He has no sense of time and no power of repletion: hence he sits on and on, and empties whatever is placed before him, and embroiders all subjects under the sun, until someone mentions the hour and he remembers a variety of engagements all of which are broken, and thinks it best perhaps to return home. Only with the assistance of cabs can he keep any appointment, and knowing this, and having at bottom a genuine if pathetic desire to be businesslike, he clings to a cabman as a drowning man to a spar and cannot bear to let him go. Cabmen therefore who have the good fortune to catch his eye live in affluence by sheer waiting for him at so much an hour outside houses.

I remember once that he lunched with me at a

restaurant and we sat on and on, he talking and the rest of us listening, when a little page boy entered to know if he still required the cab that had brought him, as the driver wanted to get something to eat; and a great handful of shillings and half crowns had to be sent out to settle the account. So it is to have a mind like A. E. B.'s, always simmering and bubbling over with ideas and theories.

He comes fully armed to every topic: either he has really meditated upon it or such is his marvellous power of improvisation — and I incline to this theory — that he can frame his inventions of the instant as though they were the result of sleepless nights. His peculiar gift is to generalise from the particular. Being for the most part so engrossed in his own fancies he sees little as he passes through the streets with moving lips as in a dream. Hence, when he does see a thing, it becomes a portent and fills his imagination. K. M., who sees everything, listening to him would be smiling in his beard all the while; but others he can take in, and does, to their immense satisfaction, for he has every rhetorical charm.

When it comes to London bookworms, memory reels, for I know so many. There is B. P., who,

with no time for the search, quietly and stealthily conveys to his home every evening a new treasure, found none knows where; and with no intellectual shop-window at all, sitting silent a whole evening unless challenged, has ever, hidden away on a mental shelf, some curious fact on every topic started, and, on actual shelves, copies of most of the rare books (and many unique ones, with autographs and marginalia of the great dead in them) of which men, on such occasions, talk. There is P. R., a pillar of learning and industry, who writes more reviews and reads more publishers' manuscripts than any ordinary five men, and yet has time to search Charing Cross Road systematically from end to end every week, see every new play, entertain and be entertained, and maintain a correspondence with his friends so copious as to compare favourably with the letters of the good days before railways and a feverish daily press had arrived to impair the art.

But my special bookworm shall be one who not only buys books and reads them but sells them — C. C. R., best of London's secondhand booksellers in this year of our Lord, and for many years past, and for many (I hope) to come, although age has set her mark upon him. C. C. R. is the true stamp. No "remainders" in his shop,

and no visible order. Dust everywhere; books everywhere: on the floor in heaps, in the cellar in heaps, and yet some mysterious secret law must govern here, for if you want a book, and he has it, it will emerge. C. C. R. however is not himself much to be seen in these days: he leaves the market to assistants, and sits in a little room at the back, so full of books that the mere process of entering it and leaving it must be a daily problem to one of his bulk; and there he pores over new discoveries or talks good book talk with such of his visitors as are thin enough or determined enough to reach and occupy the other chair. Once you are there C. C. R. pushes an opening or two in the rampart of volumes before him and through these chinks you converse like Pyramus and Thisbe.

Such glimpses of C. C. R. as you can catch show him to be about seventy, with a large fine thinking head, fringed with longish grey hair, and a pointed grey beard. His face is furrowed and his eyes suggest that reading and thought have always been put before sleep. Rembrandt should have painted him in this dark cell; or perhaps, better still, Gerard Dou, for I think that a miniature treatment would be best, and Dou was good at hermits and philosophers. Not that C.

C. R. has ever been eremitical. Among his poems — for he writes poetry — are stanzas of a genial and ruddy cast not only on ladies that he has loved but on dancing girls that he has seen (giving those tired eyes an unaccustomed balm), while among his biographical prefaces — for he has known and edited poets of revolt — are sympathetic passages indicating that he too has felt the heat of the fray.

It is a charming characteristic of C. C. R. that he has always something new to show you — usually an Elizabethan or Jacobean MS., but as often as not a well known book annotated by a not less well known reader — even S. T. C. himself. Discoveries — to you and me so epoch-making — are the warp and woof of his life. By an indefinable law, the rarities gravitate to his already over-congested treasure-house. Once he hunted them: now they hunt him. As the years before him diminish, the tasks set by his editorial ambition increase, and he grudges every minute spent away from his desk. The bookseller is gradually and steadily transmuting to author. To us, to-day, this is nothing; but how the wits at Will's Coffee House would have played with the idea, in those days when most of the jokes were at booksellers' expense!

London has many secondhand booksellers, but none like C. C. R. He alone is author and poet too. There is C. S., who has known all the scholars of the past fifty years and could make a volume of reminiscences of bookworms that should be a classic; yet he does not write, but trains canaries. There is N. O. S., to whom every goose is a swan; but he does not write. There is H. S. M., whose catalogues are in themselves treasures; but he does not write. C. C. R. is unique.

Of those Londoners of whom I have been speaking, all, I am pleased to tell, are alive and vigorous. But P. M. is no more; and the memory of P. M. I hold most dear. P. M. like H. E. was a London immigrant: he came thither not from Northumberland, like H. E., but from Bedfordshire, and he brought with him just that little bundle of impulsive idealism and generosity which he carried all his life and which the ills and misfortunes, and, most of all the disappointments and frustrations that beset his path, could do little to diminish. This he brought to London and this he took from it when he moved to a sister capital abroad: no more; for he was of that small and select band, surely very precious to the angels, whose efforts go rather towards helping others to affluence and success than themselves.

London is not over kind. London likes to see this man miss his train and that slip on orange peel; this weak-witted woman mocked by boys, and that dandy receive a mud spot full on his collar. But P. M. was essentially sympathetic and pitiful. He loathed all such calamities, and would have no train start until every sign of a hurrying passenger was absent, and would force omnibuses to carry real mud-guards, and all pavements to be cleared by authority of peel; while in his presence boys mocked a woman at their peril. For with him to feel was to act. I almost wrote, to think was to act; but I doubt if he thought at all, in the ordinary sense of the word. He arrived at conclusions; but it was by a mixed process of indignation, or joy, and instinct. I remember being with him in a windy day on London Bridge when we came upon a little knot surrounding a flower-girl whose hat had blown into the river. She stood in the midst, the picture of woe and despair, while the crowd either gaped in amusement or expressed empty regrets, most of them remarking on the impossibility of ever getting it back again: "Not from the Thames, you won't; not on a day like this;" and so forth, with endless iteration. P. M.'s method was different. His own hat was off in a moment and a

shilling (he had too few of them all his short life) in it. "Now, then, gentlemen, let's get the poor girl another hat," and such was his magnetic persuasive way that he had coaxed a sum of six shillings from those reluctant pockets in half as many minutes and the girl went on her way with her tears changed to smiles.

P. M. was perhaps a really typical Londoner only in one way — he could tell you instantly all the errors that wanted adjustment. His eye for incapacities was that of an eagle; and he usually pointed out the defect to the right person. No man can have sent for the manager so often; but where he differed from all other men who have that amusing and barren habit, was in the circumstance that no matter in what a tornado of blame the interview began, the censor and the censured were always as David and Jonathan at the end of it. But his principal and most devoted adherents were employees in lower grades — waiters and commissionaires, messenger boys and policemen, railway guards and 'bus conductors. These adored him. Not for any money that he could give them, for he had no margin for tips, but for that rarer and more flattering and memorable form of tip, a good understanding, a basis of intercourse. A joke he had for all and

something special for all too — pointing out a paragraph he had been reading in the paper; recounting a personal experience in the hearer's walk of life; making an accusation of desperate licentiousness (always unction to these good fellows); offering a cigarette from his own case. But never money. He had an instinct that money was only for those whose attachment he did not want and was not worth having. Even had he been rich I doubt if he would have given money to those whom he really liked — so fastidious and sensitive was he.

His special line was pictures, of which he knew a great deal; and together we saw many. As he grew older and bad luck kept closer to his heels, he had to abandon his connexion with art and take to literature. He took a little to cynicism too, and although the radiance of his generosity nothing could dim, his words became tinged with bitterness. For although cut down early he lived long enough to see many of his friends and acquaintances grow rich through his efforts, while receiving no kindness from any. "My boy," he said to me one day, not long before he moved abroad for ever — "My boy, remember these lines —

It's a very good world to live in,
To lend or to spend or to give in,
But to beg or to borrow or get a man's own
It's the very worst world that ever was known.

Get these lines into your head and then you'll never be surprised or shocked when you are left high and dry as I have been."

Well, he is dead now, and more and more I find myself thinking of him. My first of everything that was most valuable I seem to have had from him: he gave me my first water-colour paintings, a little sea-scape by a painter named Heery, and a romantic sketch by John Varley; he gave me my first engraving, a benefit ticket by Cipriani and Bartolozzi; he gave me my first grown-up book, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*; and all when I was not yet in the teens, or only just there, when gifts need imagination and count. . . . Above all he first showed me London.



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